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SIPDIS

USDA FAS FOR BIOTECH GROUP  
USDA FAS FOR ITP/AAD  
STATE FOR EB/TPP/ABT/BTT  
STATE PASS AIT/W  
ROME FOR US MISSION BRAKEL  
GENEVA FOR USTR  
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SUBJECT: Visit to Taiwan by Senior Advisor for Agricultural  
Biotechnology Highlights Need for Biotechnology Communications  
Strategy

Ref: A)SECSTATE 44180, B)TAIPEI 00830

1. Summary: Madelyn Spirnak, the State Department Senior Advisor for Agricultural Biotechnology, visited Taipei from March 29 - April 1, 2006. She discussed U.S. agricultural biotechnology policy with a wide range of officials. It became clear that Taiwan authorities do not have a long term strategy (also see REFTEL B) or an effective communications plan to talk with the public about agricultural biotechnology. While public opinion is relatively favorable, the lack of a risk communication strategy threatens the currently favorable environment. End Summary.

2. During her visit, Ms. Spirnak met with authorities from the principle regulatory agencies, reporters, industry representatives, and the president of one of the most influential NGOs on Taiwan.

3. The Department of Health (DOH) is responsible for food safety, and conducts, with a committee of 16 outside experts, the food safety evaluation of biotech products. Madelyn Spirnak met with Director Hsiao Tung-Ming and Senior Scientist Lin Hsin-Tang from the Bureau of Food Safety and Director General Chen Shu-Kong from the Bureau of Food and Drug Analysis. While twelve events have been approved for imported products (eleven corn and one soybean event), and four additional applications are in process, no domestic events have been approved. Under an informal policy, it is not necessary to get approval for stacked events if the components of the event have already been approved. This arrangement does not inspire confidence, and several firms have made voluntary submissions for stacked events. The DOH is one of several agencies working on a draft biotech basic law that might help resolve some of these issues, but this law is unlikely to be finished anytime soon. Separately, DOH is considering forming a consultative center to communicate with Taiwan researchers as they develop biotech products. Taiwan officials indicated their interest in obtaining US assistance to help train members of the GM Food Risk Advisory Committee.

4. The DOH has posted its review procedures and a list of approved products on the Internet. Both DOH and the Council of Agriculture (COA) have websites on biotechnology. The officials noted that while Taiwan does label biotech products, most consumers don't pay attention to the labels. They said that consumer groups raise the

potential long-term safety of biotech crops primarily to get press coverage, and they noted that the back-to-nature position of environmental organizations does not necessarily improve food safety or the environment. DOH officials said they currently do not have regular contact with U.S. FDA on agricultural biotechnology food safety issues and would welcome the opportunity to work with FDA experts.

15. The Consumer Foundation is one of the most influential NGOs on Taiwan, and often makes comments - sometimes inaccurate - on food safety issues. In a meeting with Ms. Spirnak, Chairman Jason Lee indicated that while the Foundation is aware of the benefits of biotechnology, it will also pay close attention to both food and environmental safety issues. Mr. Lee stressed the importance of consumer choice and transparency and welcomed all information, positive and negative, about the technology. Foundation officials also indicated that local consumers are concerned about food safety, are paying increasing attention to health, and that organic products are becoming more popular. Spirnak also met with members of the press, who asked questions on Taiwan competitiveness in agricultural biotechnology, biotechnology in developing countries, biotechnology and its relationship to globalization, food aid, labeling, US pressure on other countries, and China. The Central News Agency, a local wire service owned by Taiwan authorities, participated in the meeting and published a print article. The article was neutral in tone and accurately presented what Spirnak said.

16. At the Council of Agriculture (COA), Spirnak met with a large group of COA officials that was led by Vice Minister Lee Jen-Chyuan and Yeh Ying the Deputy Director of BAPHIQ - the Taiwan equivalent of APHIS. Vice Minister Lee said that a new regulatory framework - the new basic law - is required for commercialization, but that the existing administrative order is sufficient for now. He also noted

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that under a proposed reorganization, authority to conduct environmental risk assessments might be placed in a newly created Ministry of Environmental Affairs. His concept of a domestic regulatory approval process was sequential, rather than parallel as in the United States, with laboratory control under the National Science Council, field trials controlled by COA, and product approvals controlled by DOH. The Taiwan delegation inquired about how the United States coordinates the interagency process, tolerance levels for biotech products in organic food, and the possibility of the US assisting with monitoring. Spirnak indicated that the US has assisted other countries in developing and/or improving risk assessment methods; if the risk assessment is done properly, monitoring should be less of a priority.

17. Taiwan has developed ring spot virus resistant biotech papaya, and several other virus and insect-resistant crops. The papaya is in open field trials, but DOH has not completed its food safety assessment. In response to a question, Vice Minister Lee said that when farmers seek out new varieties they do not necessarily prefer transgenics, but that papaya producers are pushing for commercialization of biotech papayas. When Spirnak noted that the Philippines might commercialize their biotech papaya in 2007, the Vice Minister said that they suspect that Philippines might not have followed all of the assessment procedures. Spirnak then noted that we have found the Philippines to be a good regulatory model for Asian countries and have been impressed with their effective methods of risk communication.

18. On the Biosafety Protocol (BSP), Vice Minister Lee asked how the US will be able to segregate bulk commodities, and said that some countries have decided not to commercialize biotech products because of the BSP discussions. Spirnak noted that US Officials are studying the agreement reached at the BSP meeting in Brazil, but that the agreement doesn't apply to non-parties such as the US and Taiwan. The Vice Minister also brought up the topic of religion and biotechnology, noting that some religious leaders are opposed to animal genetics in crops.

19. At the Council for Economic Planning and Development (CEPD) Spirnak met with Vice Chair Fadah Hsieh, and Kao Shien-Quey, the Deputy Director of the Overall Planning Department. Mr. Hsieh noted

Taiwan suffers from inefficient resource allocation in the farming sector, as farmers comprise 10% of the population but use 24% of arable land. He also said that Taiwan captures and uses 18% of its rainwater, and while industry also requires high quality water, agriculture uses 74% of that high quality water.

¶10. Taiwan has goals for agricultural biotechnology, but they are not specific or particularly quantifiable. In order to avoid potential food safety concerns, their primary focus is on flower development (particularly orchids). The lack of a risk communication strategy was apparent when the Vice Chair said that the Prime Minister had responsibility to talk to the public about the safety of biotech products. The Vice Chair also noted the importance of a stable supply of food, and lamented that several traditional varieties of foods had disappeared since Taiwan entered the WTO. (Comment. These changes are probably related to improved seed varieties rather than trade effects, and mostly preceded entry into the WTO. However, public perception is that WTO accession has harmed farmers. End Comment.) The Vice Chair also commented on the difficulty of farm reform.

¶11. Comment: Ms. Spirnak's timely and useful visit highlighted and reaffirmed the apparent interest of Taiwan authorities to adopt agricultural biotechnology as a means to improve overall agricultural productivity and competitiveness. It also confirmed that a clear strategy is not in place to reach that goal (REFTEL B). AIT and a variety of partners are coordinating a number of activities with Taiwan authorities to address this shortcoming. In particular, we should look at ways to bring Taiwan and US regulatory officials together to build professional relationships and confidence in the area of risk assessment. End Comment.

YOUNG